

Toxic Journalism:

Quick facts about claims made in the Associated Press story on the Baltimore lead mitigation study, "Sludge-Poisoned Land," April 13, 2008.

Analysis by: Charles Hooks, William Toffey, Chris Peot

Claim: The story claimed that dangerous "sewage sludge" was applied to lawns in urban neighborhoods in Baltimore as part of research to study the ability of "sludge" to mitigate the effects of lead poisoning.

Fact: The material was compost, a commercially available soil amendment and fertilizer that is rated as a Class A product by the EPA and is approved for residential, commercial and agricultural uses without restrictions.

Claim: The story repeatedly uses the pejorative term "sludge," which is the untreated semi-solid residual resulting from the early stage of wastewater treatment.

Fact: The correct terminology is "biosolids," which is the official EPA term for the highly treated soil amendment and fertilizer that is approved by the EPA for recycling.

Fact: The article makes no distinction between Class A compost and Class A biosolids, which are both pathogen-free and approved for all uses, and Class B biosolids, which are approved only for carefully managed agricultural applications.

Fact: The lead writer of the AP story, John Heilprin, was fully aware of the differences between Class A compost and untreated sewage sludge, as admitted in subsequent radio interviews.

Claim: The article implies that the research did not have a credible public health purpose.

Fact: Compost had been proven in earlier field and laboratory studies to mitigate the dangers of lead in soil. The Baltimore study confirmed that compost was a cost-effective method of reducing the lead danger in a real-life urban environment.

Claim: The article implies that the families were selected for the study because they were ignorant and wouldn't question the dangers of the research.

Fact: The families were selected with the full cooperation and assistance of neighborhood community groups and were fully informed of the nature of the material and the research. They were not informed of any risks because there were none.

Fact: The families were selected because the study was aimed at mitigating the serious dangers of lead in their urban neighborhoods. It would have made no sense to conduct such studies in affluent suburbs, since those neighborhoods do not have a lead problem.

Claim: The article implies that the research is an example of racial injustice.

Fact: Heilprin deliberately misrepresented the facts in order to falsely accuse the researchers and their sponsors of endangering the health of the families.

Fact: Heilprin's misrepresentations were cynically designed to create the illusion of a great social injustice, thereby provoking outrage from the media, politicians, social and environmental activists and the public.